

# Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

*Foucault Studies*, No. 8, pp. 155-158, February 2010

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## REVIEW

**David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), ISBN: 978-0802095589**

Michel Foucault's genealogies have convincingly demonstrated that the discourses, practices, and even our physical ways of existing that we imagine are universal and natural, actually *do* have a history. Even those things we hold most dear as signs of our inner truth and individuality are not outside the sociohistorical context from which they arise. Our most basic desires have a history. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* series has been influential in the field of cultural studies of antiquity, garnering praise for its fresh approach but also criticism for its limited focus and lack of historical rigor. This latter charge fails, I think, to appreciate Foucault's expressed goals for his own work. Rather than attempting to provide an "accurate" picture of what life was like in antiquity, he is interested in historicizing the subject in other moments in time in order to problematize self and subjecthood in the present. This shifting concern parallels, for example, that in feminist studies of antiquity, where some scholars engage in a recuperative project—what did women do, think, and want—versus one of representation—i.e., what do the discourses of sex, gender, family, and so on tell us about how the society saw and organized itself? In this sense, then, Foucault's project differs from that of the classical philologist who examines the various uses of words across the entire corpus in an effort to get at the psyche or social truth of a time period. At the same time, however, Foucault's project is limited by his acknowledged lack of proficiency in ancient languages and history such that he alone cannot follow his project to its logical ends.

David Konstan's monograph *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks* in many ways bridges this boundary between the genealogist and the historian or classicist and offers the sort of precise study of self that Foucault's work suggests is necessary in order to unsettle assumptions about the universality of contemporary human experience. The text argues that the ways the ancient Greeks conceived of emotion and emotional experiences differed from those in the contemporary period in ways that reveal not only the very different social organization of the time period, but also the very different construction of the subject itself. As such, the study of ancient Greek emotions teaches us about the history and context of antiquity and also, potentially, about our current understandings of emotion and, even more fundamentally, selfhood.

Konstan takes Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as its point of departure. Aristotle's text is written as a handbook for rhetors, helping them to understand and learn various ways of appealing to emotions in the art of persuasion, making the *Rhetoric* an excellent resource for exploring the scientific life of emotions, as well as the role of emotions in intersubjective exchange dependent on narrative context. Konstan shows how, given the social context and life of emotions in ancient Greek culture, emotion was an act of cognition, of judgment, one that was centered on the acts and responses of the other. This differs fundamentally from the contemporary understanding of emotions as self-centered, aligned with the production of the Christian self-confessing subject, whose emotions are seen as fundamental to a sense of self. Emotions that are considered wholly individual, such as melancholy or romantic jealousy, have no counterpart in the ancient emotional vocabulary. Marking this difference demonstrates how emotions, far from being universal expressions of some essential humaneness, have a history.

Konstan explores this claim in depth by means of an analysis of twelve emotions. The first chapter, "Pathos and Passion," lays out his general argument that Greek emotion is best understood as a response to actions that affect the social standing of interested parties in which emotion is part of an intersubjective exchange rather than an internal state. This general argument is supported by close readings of emotional terms from Aristotle in the context of other ancient texts. These analyses demonstrate the power of the classical philologist's approach to what we might still call genealogy. For example, Konstan's chapter on jealousy argues convincingly that an emotion we see as basic to our sense of love and human relationship had no counterpart in ancient Greece. His evidence starts with the fact that Aristotle fails to mention the emotion in his *Rhetoric*, but Konstan then explores the appearance of the term in wider contexts, answering the lay reader's immediate doubt. Greek tragedy is all about romantic jealousy, is it not? How else can we explain Medea's deadly revenge after Jason leaves her? Or Odysseus's reaction when he returns home and finds that Penelope has had to resist many suitors? Konstan shows through a close examination of various words and contexts that what looks like jealousy to modern eyes is not about a romantic sense of jealousy, but instead about infringements on social norms of personal welfare and status. His analysis works to historicize emotions we see as natural and further illuminates Greek cultural life on its own terms.

This idea that in ancient Greece various emotions concern breaches of social norms and status runs through Konstan's volume and demonstrates well the effect social organization has on self-awareness. In his chapter on anger, for example, Konstan shows how anger is a response to a slight by someone of lesser status, dependent on the ability to exact revenge, an ability contingent on unequal status in the status-focused world of antiquity. Unlike modern conceptions of anger that rely on demonizing the other, for example, the hierarchical world of Greek power and status produced anger that was usually motivated by a desire to maintain proper power relationships in the city-state society. This conception is further developed in his chapter on satisfaction, or what is often interpreted as the emotion opposed to anger. Konstan shows how, given the political

structure of the state and its emphasis on status, very little time would be spent on performing acts to improve one's character, since one's character and status were not dependent on the words or deeds of another.

Overall, Konstan's book does a good job of showing the very different social world of emotion in ancient Greece. Though there is overlap in emotional life between modern and ancient cultures, it is not Konstan's concern. He is more concerned with confronting the contemporary scholar's tendency to make definitions based on contemporary understanding. As Konstan shows in his chapter on shame, echoing Foucault's work on modern subjectivity, the sense of an internal self is a contemporary historical production. Rather than assuming that the lack of Greek guilt tied to ethical life demonstrates moral backwardness, Konstan asks what the other-directed sense of shame has to tell us about different social and subjective worlds and the historical nature of our own senses of subjectivity. In his chapter on love, though, Konstan shows that *philia*, in its constitution as an emotion that exceeds the self in its uncoerced desire to provide for another (176), overlaps in an important sense our own concepts of love. This differs from the rest of the chapters that focus almost solely on the differences between their emotions and ours. The discussion of love thus offers a complex examination what difference means, and what our similarities might have to say about the status of emotions more generally. At the same time, though, our notions of friendship and the love for a friend are impoverished in comparison. Konstan's analyses, even when they articulate similarities, put into sharp focus the differences between our conceptions of emotions and those of the ancient Greeks, demonstrating the different moral universes and senses of self and other social organizations of these historical contexts. In so doing, he offers an important supplement to Foucault's project, showing that emotions do indeed have a history, and even what seems natural—how we feel—is constituted by language, culture, and power.

At the same time, the reader must do much of this work of connection. A number of chapters declare that the goal is to illuminate some aspect of the present. Any history, to recall Foucault, is a history of the present. Not only does history historicize the present, but it also lays bare the problematics that dominate the present context. What do modern concerns with the cultural life of emotions have to tell us about our own conceptions of ourselves, our relations to others, and the social world we inhabit? What do the very questions the scholar asks have to say about the discursive world that scholar inhabits? What questions fail to make sense in the ancient versus contemporary context? Konstan declares that his study can shed light on these questions, but his emphasis on the philological variations of the Aristotelian emotional vocabulary militates against the cultural studies work he claims his text does. The opening chapter declares that his study has significant implications for understanding classical Greek emotions in philosophy and literature, but that it might also "offer a useful perspective on certain problems in the scientific interpretation of the emotions today."<sup>(40)</sup> These connections to the present come at the end of each chapter, but often amount to a hope that the chapter has helpfully illuminated contemporary debates about emotions. For example, Konstan ends his chapter

on shame with the claim that "... a careful examination of the value of emotion terms in other languages can also enrich and clarify our own emotional vocabulary."(110) This is assuredly the case, but the reader is left largely responsible for doing that work. But for this it might be important to remember that any reading demands a construction of a world between reader and author. Konstan's book is rich with examples and an important addition to studies of the present that Foucault convincingly shows in his own work are necessary for locating that position slantwise to power from which we might resist the very conditions of our subjectivity.

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